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## OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING GOVERNMENT HIGHER SCHOOLS IN WEST CHINA

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Most travelers in China of a literary bent have, it seems, felt called upon to convey to their less fortunate brethren at home generalizations concerning the status of the people there, socially, morally, and intellectually, and to discuss the political, economic, and educational significance and outlook attached thereto. It would have been well if most of these writings had been candidly labeled, *Impressions of a Careless Traveler*, in order that the world might have properly classified them as literary art and license and not as encyclopedic information. Residents in China, who are students of conditions there, know full well how reckless and how far from the truth these writings tend to be, and have come to maintain a chronic attitude of antipathy toward all such attempts to do what they themselves seem scarcely able to do. Observations made by the most seasoned and careful of these students are subject to numerous exceptions, if not in the immediate vicinity of the observer, in other portions of the great empire.

It is, therefore, with a great deal of hesitation, that the present effort to isolate certain general facts connected with the status of the "new education" in China is attempted. Let it be understood at once, then, that the writer shall describe only those situations that came under his personal observation during a period of residency in west-central China, as a teacher in a government college. This portion of China apparently is little known to western readers. Furthermore, it is as isolated from the influences of the coastwise provinces, where most of the foreign innovations are seen, as is the Pacific slope from the Atlantic seaboard, and more so, for the only open route of travel involves a journey of about two months up the Yangtse River before the center of political and educational influences of all that vast region is reached. About this center, the city of

Cheng-tu, is gathered a homogenous population nearly equal to that of the United States. However much the educational situations may differ from those on the coast, they are, it is believed, fairly representative for this great western portion of the empire.

Perhaps the first strong impression that a westerner receives upon coming into touch with one of these new Chinese educational institutions is that one and all of the westernisms, which they have incorporated by the wholesale, have been corrupted. Against this he revolts; how much better is the thought that they continue to use their own conventions, than to pollute ours; to maintain their own customary environment, the spirit and meaning of which they understand and appreciate, than to incorporate part of the form but none of the spirit of ours. And there is no denying, for example, the picturesqueness of the long, clean, blue gown of the student, with the long, carefully braided queue hanging down his back, and the neatly shaven forehead, setting off the natural fulness of the fresh, open countenance. The contrast of this native dress with the slovenly attempts sometimes made, to imitate our tailored garments with cheap cotton muslin, and our tightly fitting shoes, is fairly painful. The jaunty home-made cap forms a most unhappy combination with the long, braided hair. The buildings, schoolrooms, and furniture are often no better than attempts at imitation; the division of the students into classes, with recitation and study periods, marking of grades, graduation ceremonies, diplomas, etc., are but outward semblances of our own. Gradually, upon more intimate acquaintance, a more charitable and rational view forces itself home and the westerner begins to realize that certain forms are, after all, inseparable from the spirit and subject-matter of our curricula; hence the acceptance by the Chinese of our educational ideas and ideals, means perforce the taking over of some of the forms, the machinery by which they are attained. In perhaps every instance it will be observed that the educational administrators have adapted this machinery to the local possibilities, and have succeeded in acclimating what would not otherwise persist in the intellectual climate of this very different land. In a word, adaptation, and not adoption, is what has taken place.

To be concrete, the hindering gowns must be discarded when the student is given free reign for the play of his instinctive activities. And let it be borne in mind here that this conception, that the student need not mope solemnly around like an owl, is not the least of the grand new ideals that China has caught from the West. For the first time in the history of the race, the children in the schools are encouraged to play, and they take to it as kindly as if their possibilities had always been so. Athletics are receiving serious attention; in fact the tendency now is to be *too* serious and formal about it; inter-school contests, especially between the elementary schools, are attended with an interest and enthusiasm unsurpassed by our best here at home. In substituting a bifurcated garment for the gowns, then, and leather shoes or boots for the old stiff-soled cloth slippers, they have properly, and by force of circumstances, appealed to their local artisans and drawn upon their native materials, and hence it is not to be expected that an altogether sightly costume should spring forth all at once. But as time goes on, and as the workmen become more skilled in this new departure, this make-shift habit will settle down into something more artistic and more Chinese.

Again, the old Chinese schools demanded no division into classes at all; the curriculum consisting essentially of but one subject, each student advanced as fast as his ability and diligence permitted. Now it is necessary to make the familiar division into classes. This division they base primarily upon date of entrance into the institution. Entrance examinations are usually held, but being based principally, if not wholly, upon the Chinese classics, no homogeneity upon the basis of academic equality in western subjects is possible. There is not even the equality of zero, for no longer is it true that all students come up with no preparation in these branches; the translation bureaus and presses of the great publishing houses in Shanghai have been working with great earnestness and speed, and have spread our languages and sciences and philosophy and history and religious writings broadcast, and upon these every educated, progressive man has been at work. Moreover, the mission schools, and a few

natively endowed and publicly supported schools have been for some time preparing students in western subjects. From this it may be inferred that the class coming up for high-secondary or college work is a difficult proposition for the imported teacher. But it bothers him far more than it does either the school officials or the students themselves. They settle this lack of equality, or entire lack, in preparation, by advancing each student in and with his class, and at the end of the stipulated period graduating the whole class, provided some other cause does not enter in, such as insubordination. By this method the school passes its students along with surprising smoothness and regularity, ridding itself easily of the clogging effects of "hold-backs." But it is always most careful to protect itself by faithfully recording all grades and averages attained by the individuals, and at the end of the term, and at graduation, publishing these for circulation. Even on the diplomas the final grades and rank in class are carefully inscribed—one such diploma was seen with a grade of 15 per cent. inscribed upon it. Thus, in effect, the school says, "We take no responsibility; if you want to judge a man, look at his grades and standing, not his diploma. We simply certify that he has spent the prescribed length of time here, and has taken this list of subjects." This feature, we are prone to say, is sure evidence of the pioneering stage of western education in China. While this is true, it is still more to the point that it is thoroughly Chinese in its inception and practice, for at every turn, among other features, it is planned "to save face." On this count alone it has a fundamentally psychological basis. These administrators are wise in their generation—wiser than many foreigners who have established schools in China. Every foreigner there in this work knows how much of what we deem immovable principle must be compromised in order to attain the best results with these students. It is to be regretted that some foreigners, either from lack of ability or willingness, do not adapt their ordinary conventions to the Chinese conditions.

Another outstanding feature of these schools is the helter-skelter scramble they are making to acquire some sort of a grasp of these western subjects, and the slight appreciation entertained

of the great price they must pay for this accumulation of centuries. One old Chinese gentleman, it is reported, has expressed a general conception by remarking, upon learning that our alphabet contained but twenty-six letters, that they could learn all that we could do with that number of "characters"! One would suppose that the first brush of the students with, say mathematics, would cure them of this rush and this conceit, but the disposition seems to blame the teacher, lack of time, anything but themselves or the intrinsic difficulty of the subject. This general attitude leads, in one college, to a fresh clamor at the opening of each term, by both officers and teachers, to the foreign teachers, to cut down the time devoted to work already being done, and to add entirely new courses. To be entirely fair, there probably does exist an appreciation of the great amount of work that must ultimately be covered—and this appreciation is becoming more and more vivid, but the conceit in themselves, and, be it added, in the abilities of their foreign teachers, to do this herculean task, seems to be little lessened by the many failures recorded against them by these teachers. As a result of this intense earnestness in the college in question, divisions are sitting in the lecture- and classrooms (study periods aside) upward of forty hours per week, and at the close of the term being examined in as high as seventeen subjects! And in the face of a condition like this, the clamor to rush the work still more, so that they might get out and go to teaching the sooner, became so insistent that six months was lopped off the four years' course of the secondary-school students.

It must not be inferred from what has been said that no real results are being achieved, for notwithstanding these and other kindred handicaps, much real knowledge is being gained, and, better than this, the more adequate educational ideal is gaining ground rapidly. Naturally the situation has a brighter side than we are presenting just here. It scarcely need be remarked that when these handicaps are removed the Chinese students will be second to none in the world. Already many indications point to the fact that the turning-point has been reached and that educational practices are settling down into normal healthy channels.

It is simply unthinkable that a nation of scholars, so thorough and laboriously patient as they have been with their own classics, should long continue to slight our learning. Undoubtedly this national habit of taking their study most seriously, and devoting long hours to its pursuit, has been transferred directly to the present study of western subjects, and much of what we have classed above as enthusiasm may equally well be said to be habit. But whether we class this intense application in one category or the other, or in both at the same time, makes little difference in the final outcome, which is that *results* beyond all that we can now see are bound to be achieved by it.

Another striking fact connected with these schools is the widespread insubordination of the students. It is not the trivial lack of proper deportment of schoolboys, or the rowdiness of college students of this country, for the Chinese student, in school and out, is a model of attention and gentlemanly conduct. The "rough-house" is one institution not yet transplanted. It is due to a serious belief on the part of the students that some desire of theirs should be gratified, or that some right of theirs is being abused. When no other means suffice to persuade the officers to their point of view, a strike is the inevitable method used. It is a powerful weapon of aggression, for, strange as it may seem to us that government school officials should be thus moved, in a large number of cases, probably in a majority, they have been successful. It is always difficult in China to say who actually wins out in a squabble, for a compromise is the first thing thought of and usually in one form or another prevails; but in the case of these school strikes, which consist in a refusal to attend classes, it seems to the foreigner that any sort of a compromise is a victory for the students. Practically, judging from the growing frequency and the trivial causes back of the strikes, the students are the winners.

An illustration or two may serve to make this point clear. In one case, about a year ago, a whole school struck because one of their number was punished by a proctor for persisting in practicing upon the school organ during the evening study period. In another case a Japanese professor was forced to

resign his post because, nominally, he overstepped his authority in mildly reprimanding a class for lack of attention to their notebooks; the whole class refused to attend his recitations until some sort of an agreement was patched up, and at the end of the term he resigned. It is less than four months since a whole college was on strike pending the adjustment of a fight which broke out during the field-day sports then in progress; two weeks in all were thus lost right in the midst of the semester. It should be added here that it is very difficult for one to get at the real cause of these disagreements, for the assigned reason and the real one may have little in common; even the principals will talk to each other in riddles. On two separate occasions, during graduation ceremonies, the writer has seen a student deliberately step out of the line of his fellows, walk across the great floor in the face of the whole assemblage of students, officials, and visiting dignitaries of the highest rank, and hand his certificate back to the chancellor of education of the province with some remark to the effect that he had not been accorded his proper rank. Only an amazing amount of either stupidity or courage could prompt such a public announcement, for the charges implied were of a most serious kind and could only result in his undoing as a student, unless he belonged to a sufficiently influential family or could stir the student body to his support. After the close of one of these ceremonies the customary "feast" was set for the students; but instead of enjoying it in a normal fashion they deliberately overturned every table with their heavy loads of victuals, savories, and dishes. The reason for this extraordinary piece of vandalism never leaked out from the president's office, but it was probably done in sympathy for the aggrieved student who so soon sank into oblivion.

Nowhere in the world has the teacher been held in greater respect than in China. He has simply ruled supreme in all that pertains to his sphere; hence the present revolt from his authority is the more surprising. To some extent it is no doubt newly found liberty being interpreted as license; and as precedent is a persistent master in China, it is not pleasant to contemplate the



final outcome of these many yieldings of the officials to the students.

Back of these strikes lies the propensity of the Chinese to organize into various kinds of secret societies. The students are no strangers to this instinct and although forbidden to organize by severe penalties, nevertheless do. All the efforts of the government to blot out their existence seems to be ineffectual. Aside from the fact that the strikes are thus fostered and energized, probably the chief objection to these societies is that they are the breeding-places of the revolutionary spirit. For the reasons above mentioned and because of the ever-present dissatisfaction with the reigning dynasty, the students seem to be in a perpetual state of unrest. Undoubtedly this feeling is fostered by the Chinese students who are over in Japan studying. These latter, being free from all trammels, organize to their heart's content and, under the influence of their successful progressive hosts, become most radical and anarchistic in their expressions against their own government. Whether the Japanese directly foster this spirit or not, we are not in a position to judge, for the evidence is conflicting, but certainly they do not suppress it. The outcome of this condition is that a vast amount of literature is printed and sent over to China to inflame the students at home. This results in its turn in a strict censoring of all literature that comes into the students' hands and with the usual result that much really good literature is denied them. A school never knows when the censors may order its great gates closed, and every man and every nook and corner be subjected to a minute search. Not infrequently during the last year, in one city, for reasons not clearly given out, numbers of students were imprisoned, and in several other instances students were beheaded. We do not profess to understand how fundamentally deep these feelings may be, nor to know how widespread these conditions may appertain, and repeat that reference is made here to the conditions as they were observed in west China, and in those schools under government control.

In conclusion we would call attention to the paradoxical condition presented in the foregoing observations—to the westerner,

the Chinese seem to do everything “backward.” We say that, on the one hand, strict obedience to school discipline should be insisted upon, where obedience obtains, and, on the other, a progressive inauguration of such reforms as are consistent with the expanding knowledge and enlarged experience of the students—and be it added, of the whole people—should be the policy.